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CIA director speaks softly

Casey's mumbling contributed to furor over Nicaragua mining

By Richard Whittle
Washington Bureau of The News

WASHINGTON — When William Casey talks, members of the House and Senate Intelligence committees listen — but some say they often can't hear.

The CIA director, who turned 71 last month, speaks in a voice as wispy as his thin white hair. Like the Allied agents he helped infiltrate behind German lines as a World War II officer in the Office of Strategic Services, Casey's words have a way of fading murkily into the ether.

"I think I am not being unkind to say (that) Mr. Casey is not known for having high marks in elocution; that it's not always clear what exactly is being said when he is talking," said Sen. William S. Cohen, a Maine Republican who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Waxing unintelligible is so much Casey's trademark that even President Reagan has joked about it. He has said that one of Casey's assets as head of the nation's top spy agency is that he requires no electronic "scrambler" to garble his telephone conversations as a guard against interception.

Far from just an amusing quirk, Casey's mumbling has been a factor in his dispute with members of the Senate Intelligence Committee over whether he properly informed them of the CIA's direct role in mining Nicaragua's harbors.

Casey took the extraordinary step of paying personal "fence-mending" calls on committee members last week and even signed a formal memorandum of apology at the behest of Sens. Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, and Richard Lugar, R-Ind.

But Casey, who declined through a spokesman to be interviewed, was slow to admit any error. At first he had CIA officials issue statements saying he had complied with the 1980 Intelligence Oversight Act, which requires him to keep Congress "fully and currently informed" of any "significant" intelligence operations.

As a result, before his apology, Casey's relations with the Senate committee had grown so sour that some members were suggesting that he resign.

Though it is not likely that Reagan would ask him to quit, it is less likely that Casey would volunteer to leave a job that has let him delve again into the mysterious world of secret intelligence operations, which by his own past admission he came to love as a young OSS officer.

Whatever the course of his future dealings with Capitol Hill, it is widely agreed that the episode has raised the ghost of the sinister, headstrong image the CIA acquired after 1970s revelations of past CIA assassination plots and coups.

It is no secret that Casey has a special bond with the clandestine service — the arm of the organization that plots and implements covert programs in the realms of propaganda, political intrigue and paramilitary operations — based on his experience in the kind of work they do. It is said that he has even gone into Central America himself, traveling in unmarked planes, to check on the progress of his agency's operations.

For that reason, said a former intelligence official who has worked with Casey personally, the director is unlikely to change his ways without direct orders from Congress. The former official asked not to be identified.

"Running the clandestine service," the official said, "well, he just loves to do it."

Some of Casey's supporters disagree that his affinity for covert action has hurt the agency's image. Former CIA Director William L. Colby, for one, said the congressional furor reflects no distrust of Casey but merely a lack of consensus on whether the CIA's Nicaraguan operations are wise.

But the controversy appears to have killed whatever chances the administration had of getting the House to approve $21 million to resupply the CIA-backed rebels, known as *contras*, who are warring against Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista government.

Cohen and other Senate committee members are still saying that while Casey may have referred during March briefings to mines being placed in Nicaragua's harbors, the words he used and his customary mumbling prevented the committee from understanding the CIA's role in placing them.